

OCTOBER 2022

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October 1, 2022
God's Story, Our Story

Readings for today: Nehemiah 8-10

Creation. Abraham. Egypt. Exodus. Judges. Promised Land. Kings. Temple. Priests. Prophets. Exile. Return. Whenever the people of God renew their covenant with the Lord, they take time to remember their story. They understood their current situation was but the latest link in a chain of events stretching all the way back to the Garden. All the way back to God Himself at the dawn of creation. But for God, they would have been destroyed. But for God, they would have been erased. But for God, there would be no history. No story to tell. Listen to them tell it again and think about how far they've come...

"You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you. You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous. "And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day. And you divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land, and you cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into mighty waters. By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go. You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them. "But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, 'This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,' and had committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell. "And you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner. So they took possession of the land of Sihon king of Heshbon and the land of Og king of Bashan. You multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and you brought them into the land that you had told their fathers to enter and possess. So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they would. And they captured fortified cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness. "Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them

back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies. But after they had rest they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. "Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them. Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works. Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress." (Nehemiah 9:6-37)

Those of you who have been tracking with us through the Bible this year know these stories. You've read them in great detail. You've pondered them. You've prayed over them. You've listened for the voice of God in them. Some of you grew frustrated at times. You couldn't understand why they kept making the same mistakes. Others of you got angry at times. You couldn't understand the righteous judgment of God. Many of you laughed and cried and wrestled and struggled with the lessons the people were learning. About themselves. About their God. About His plan and His future.

It's important for us to remember this story. To read it over and over again for it is our story as well. As Christians, we are grafted into this story. Adopted into this family. Warts and all. These people are our people. They are our mothers and fathers. Sisters and brothers in the faith. And we are so like them. If we're honest with ourselves, we too make the same mistakes over and over again. We too sin and fall short of the glory of God. We too deserve judgment and death. Punishment and exile. But we have the benefit of living after Christ. Jesus Christ took the punishment we deserved. He went into exile for us. He endured the righteous wrath of God on our behalf. He stood in our place just as surely as He stands in the place of the Old Testament saints who came before us. He is Savior of the world. Past. Present. Future. He is the Alpha and Omega. The Beginning and the End. His blood is sufficient to cover every sin. As we head into the New Testament, we must hold onto our history. Christ came as the climax of this history. He is the One to whom the Old Testament points. He is the One in whom all prophecies are fulfilled. He is the One every single saint from Abraham forward looked to by faith. May we look to Him as well!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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October 3, 2022

A Futile Hope

Readings for today: Nehemiah 11-13, Psalm 126

I grew up watching Star Wars as a kid and it is generally accepted that *The Empire Strikes Back* is the best of the original trilogy, if not the best in the entire series. It's a very dark movie. Evil is on the move and in fact, seems to be winning. The end of this second installment finds the heroes in disarray. Luke Skywalker has lost a hand and his innocence as he finds out Darth Vader is his father. Han Solo has been captured and frozen in carbon so he can be delivered to Jabba the Hut. Leia, Chewbacca, the droids, and Lando aren't quite sure what to do and the hopes of the rebellion seem very slim. It's all a set up of course. The final installment of the series will see the heroes overcome all these obstacles to win an improbable victory against a seemingly invincible enemy. Stop me if this plot seems familiar at all.

The Old Testament doesn't end well. It doesn't matter if you read it canonically (Genesis - Malachi) or chronologically as we have done this year. The bottom line is the same. Israel is in disarray. Despite their return to the Promised Land, they simply cannot get it right. They are unable to remain faithful. They intermarry. They profane the Sabbath. They worship other gods. It's enough to drive us to despair. And that's the point. Throughout the Old Testament, God is at work bringing us to the end of ourselves. The end of our strength. The end of our resources. The end of our wisdom so we will cry out to Him. He's preparing His people for the coming of the Savior. Because it is impossible for us to remain faithful, He must do it for us. Because it is impossible for us to obey God's Law, He must do it for us. Because the sacrifices are only temporary, Jesus must become the perfect sacrifice on our behalf. Hanging between heaven and earth. Representing both God and humanity. He intercedes for us even as He takes our place.

If you are wired like me, you find the end of the Old Testament incredibly unsatisfying. It goes over like a lead balloon. A wet blanket. It just leaves a bad taste in your mouth. The reason I feel this way is because deep down I want to believe I can be a good person. Deep down I want to believe that if I work hard enough, stay disciplined enough, read the Bible enough, pray enough, worship enough, you name it; I can work my way to God. I can find favor with Him. I can earn His praise. But Ephesians 2:8-9 confronts me with the truth, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Saved by grace. Saved through faith which is itself a gift from God. None of my works matter in the grand scheme of things because God will not allow me to boast in anything except Christ.

We've spent nine months in the Old Testament. It's a long, hard slog no doubt. We have watched the same pattern repeat itself over and over again. God raises up His people only to watch them fall into sin. Adam and Eve. Noah and his family. Abraham and Sarah. Moses and the Exodus. Joshua and the Judges. Samuel and Saul. David and Bathsheba. On and on the list goes until you get to Ezra, Nehemiah and the Exiles. All of them sin and fall short of the glory of God. All of them are like sheep who have gone astray. All of them unworthy of anything but God's judgment. So how does God respond?

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

Readings for tomorrow: Psalm 106, John 1:4-14

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October 4, 2022

God's Answer to Our Deepest Cry

Readings for today: Psalm 106, John 1:4-14

Over the last 10+ years, I have been blessed to travel the world. I have been to China, South Korea, Japan, Mexico, Israel, Jordan, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Uganda. I have met men and women from South Sudan, North Korea, Iraq, Palestinian territories, Somalia, Djibouti, Cambodia, and a host of other nations. They all speak different languages. They all belong to different tribes. They all come from different cultures. But as I've listened to them share their stories, there is a common thread. A common cry that arises from the depths of every human heart. It doesn't seem to matter if one holds to a particular faith tradition or not. It's a cry for salvation. A cry for deliverance from all the evil and suffering in our world.

Listen to how an ancient song-writer once put it, "Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise." (Psalm 106:47) After cataloging all the different ways his people shamed, disobeyed, and rejected God, the Psalmist also is quick to remind his readers of the many ways God had saved them. He is confident not in the faithfulness of his own people but in the faithfulness of God which He demonstrates throughout their shared history. This is a great lead-in to the New Testament and the reading from the Gospel of John where the most marvelous thing takes place. A miracle much greater than the parting of the Red Sea. A promise much greater than the Promised Land. A salvation much greater than the temporary respites won against their enemies. God has indeed looked on their distress. God has indeed heard their cry. For their sake and for the sake of all those who would come after them, God remembers His covenant and acts in accordance to His steadfast love.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

Friends, this is the central mystery of the Christian faith. Christ was born. Christ has died. Christ was risen. Christ will come again. The mystery of the incarnation - God literally taking on human flesh and human nature to become one of us - is God's great answer to the deepest cries of our hearts. He comes to be with us. He comes to meet us in our suffering. He comes to sit with us in the dust and ashes of our lives. God is faithful and true. He will not override the freedom He instilled in us at the dawn of creation. He will not abrogate the authority He gave us when He made us stewards over all He has made. This world has been entrusted into our care. The pain and suffering of this world is a result of the many, many choices human beings have made throughout history. Stacking sin upon sin, we are constantly reaping what we have sown. Nation rages against nation. Tribe rages against tribe. Clan against clan. Family against family. This is the story of the human race and yet God refuses to let us go. He refuses to abandon us to our fate. He willingly enters human history to become one of us, die for us, rise for us, and show us a different way. He willingly enters the heart of "all who would receive Him, who believe in His name" and He gives them the right to be called His children. Children not born of blood or of the flesh but of the will of God.

God has stayed true to His plan. He has come to save us from ourselves. He has come to set us free from our captivity to our basest desires and instincts. He has come to deliver us from evil... primarily the evil that reside within each one of us. He has come to offer us life and that life is the light of all humanity. It shines in the darkness of our world and great news of the gospel is that the darkness can never overcome it!

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 1, Luke 1:1-2:38

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October 5, 2022
The Calling of God

Readings for today: Matthew 1, Luke 1:1-2:38

There's a church in Israel built over the top of Zechariah's home. It's in the hill country of Judah. It commemorates the place where Mary and Elizabeth met after receiving the incredible news that their two boys would change the world. I love the statue pictured above. It's a beautiful depiction of both women, both pregnant, marveling at all God had done for them. They were the most unlikely participants in God's divine drama. One woman, Elizabeth, barren and advanced in years past the point of ever getting pregnant. Another woman, Mary, still very much a teenager, unmarried, and a virgin. Both women receive an angelic visitation from Gabriel who "stands in the presence of God" and is sent to deliver the good news of John and Jesus' births. Both women are overshadowed by the Holy Spirit as their wombs are blessed with the miracle of new life.

And what a life they were given! Their boys would be great before the Lord. One would be filled with the Holy Spirit from conception. His call would be to turn the hearts of of the children of Israel back to God. He preach in the spirit and power of Elijah and he would prepare the way for his cousin who would be called Son of the Most High. He would be conceived by the Holy Spirit and would be given the throne of David in order to reign over the house of Jacob forever. He would be called holy and the Son of God. The first of these two boys would be named John. The second would be named Jesus. One can only imagine the conversations Elizabeth and Mary had during the three months Mary stayed with them.

It's tempting to read these stories and believe that these women were somehow different than us. More holy. More righteous. More special in some way. Nothing could be further from the truth. God simply chose them to play a particular role in His great salvation plan. You and I have been called to play particular roles as well. Roles only we can play. Roles specifically suited for our unique mix of personality, passion, and ability. Yes, we may not receive angelic visitations but the call of God comes to us just the same. It comes through His Word and in prayer. It comes to us through our brothers and sisters in Christ. It comes to us as we survey the great needs of the world around us. And those whom God calls, God equips. Those whom God calls, He qualifies. He sends His Holy Spirit to "overshadow" all the work we do in His name. Friends, if you trust in Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, you have been called and invited to play a vital role in God's salvation plan! God wants to use YOU to help bring about His Kingdom on this earth! Seek His wisdom so you may know not only what your role may be but how best to fulfill that role in your life.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 2, Luke 2:39-52

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October 6, 2022
Reaction to Jesus

Readings for today: Matthew 2, Luke 2:39-52

Jesus evokes the strongest of reactions. Wise men from the east. Probably pagan astrologers who watched the skies over Babylon. Men who possibly had been raised on the stories of their fabled Jewish forebears, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, come to Israel following a star. The heavenly sign was so compelling they traveled who knows how many miles over how many weeks to worship and offer gifts to a newborn king.

Jesus evokes the strongest of reactions. The king of Israel. Descendent of Esau through his father who had converted, Herod was raised a Jew. However, he was not of the Davidic line and therefore was a pretender at best to the throne. Furthermore, he reigned at the whim of Caesar, his first allegiance being to the Roman Empire rather than Yahweh. He received the news the wise men brought and was troubled. The news of a new king being born would be a threat to his own power. So he marshals his forces and lays waste to the entire region surrounding Bethlehem, killing all the male children under two years of age.

Jesus evokes the strongest of reactions. Joseph and Mary are traveling home from their annual trek to Jerusalem. After they make camp for the night, they realize Jesus is not with them. He has remained behind. So back they go frantic in their search for their now 12 year old son. For three days, they searched high and low throughout the city only to find him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions. “Why have you treated us like this?” Why disrespect us? Why not obey us? Why did you not come when it was time to go? Their anger and frustration is palpable. And Jesus humbles himself and returns with them to Nazareth.

Jesus evokes the strongest of reactions. The Heavenly Father looks down on His Son. Sees Him in danger in Bethlehem and sends an angel to warn his parents to flee the coming massacre. Sees him at the Temple listening and learning from the teachers of the Law. Sees him as he grows up under the love and guidance of Joseph and Mary. The Father sees it all and grants the Son favor. Blessing. Wisdom. Strength. Preparing him for the day when he would launch his ministry. Laying the groundwork for what’s to come.

What’s your reaction to Jesus? How do you receive Him? Is it with a glad heart? Do you feel yourself compelled to seek Him and grow a relationship with Him like the wise men? Is it fear? Do you, like Herod, respond in fear and anxiety to the idea that Jesus would be your Lord and Savior? Is it frustration? Like Joseph and Mary, does Jesus sometimes confound your expectations? Or do you respond with love and devotion? Is Jesus finding greater “favor” with you with each passing year?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 3, Mark 1:1-11, Luke 3, John 1:15-34

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October 7, 2022
John the Baptist

Readings for today: Matthew 3, Mark 1:1-11, Luke 3, John 1:15-34

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” (Malachi 4:5-6)

John the Baptist is one of the most fascinating figures in all the Bible. He is Elijah reborn. The one whom Malachi prophesied would prefigure the coming of the Messiah. He is the messenger. The final Old Testament prophet. Like the prophets of old, he lives an ascetic lifestyle. He dwells in the desert. Survives on locusts and wild honey. Wears clothing made from wild camel hide. From birth, he was set apart as a Nazarite which meant no wine touched his lips nor would he cut his hair. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and he was sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

John preached a message of repentance. In keeping with his prophetic forebears, he pulled no punches. He showed no fear. In the face of political and religious opposition, he spoke the truth. He called out the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. He called out the immoral behavior of Herod the tetrarch. He called out the sins of the people as they came to be baptized. He called them to obedience. Called them to surrender. To sacrifice. To devote their lives to Yahweh. And revival began sweeping the region.

God called John to serve a very special purpose. Though it meant prison. Though it would eventually cost him his life. John was called to prepare the way for Jesus. To make His path straight. To lift up every valley. To tear down every mountain. To straighten out the crooked and smooth the rough edges. He was called to lay the groundwork for the ministry of the Messiah so that all people might see the salvation of God. His calling was not to fame. Fortune. Safety. Security. Comfort. Peace. As soon as his ministry gets rolling, he hands it off. As soon as he is becoming popular, Jesus shows up on the scene. As soon as he really starts getting traction, he steps aside.

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) This is our calling as well. To step aside. To get out of the limelight. To do all we can to point everyone to Christ. It may not make us popular. It may not gain us fame or fortune or a good reputation. It may cost us some of our rights. Some of our freedoms. Some of us may indeed be put in prison. Some of us indeed may lose our lives. (Not necessarily here in America but certainly in many places around the world.) The calling John received from God has been given to the church. To preach the good news of the gospel to the ends of the earth. To call people to repentance before the Lord. To call people to surrender their lives to Jesus before it's too late. Before the day of judgment comes. Before the ax is laid to the root of the tree and the wicked are cut off. We too must make straight the path for Jesus. We too must lift up every valley. Tear down every mountain. Straighten out the crooked and smooth over the rough edges. In short, we must do all we can to remove every barrier to Christ. We must ourselves get out of the way so that others will see Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 4:1-22, 13:54-58, Mark 1:12-20, Mark 6:1-6, Luke 4:1-30, 5:1-11, John 1:35-51, 2:1-12

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October 8, 2022

Temptation

Readings for today: Matthew 4:1-22, 13:54-58, Mark 1:12-20, Mark 6:1-6, Luke 4:1-30, 5:1-11, John 1:35-51, 2:1-12

One of the more powerful experiences of my recent trip to Israel was visiting the Mount of Temptation. Tradition holds this is where the Spirit drove Jesus after His baptism. It's located in the hills outside of Jericho in a desolate region of the country. For centuries, many devout believers have come to this mountain to live as hermits. They come to dedicate their lives to fasting and prayer. You can see some of the original caves in the mountainside. You can even visit a Greek Orthodox Monastery that was built on the slopes overlooking both Jericho and the Jordan River valley. Some of the structures date back to the 6th century and supposedly at it's heart lies the very cave where Jesus spent His forty days and forty nights.

I took the journey all the way into the heart of the monastery to see the place where Jesus is said to have been tempted. I stood in front of the stone where He sat and looked out the window. I tried to imagine myself in this dry, deserted place without food or water for forty days. I looked at the stones on the mountainside and thought to myself, "These stones? These are the stones He could have made into bread?" I looked out at Jericho to the place where Herod the Great built his winter palace and thought to myself, "This is the kind of power and authority the devil offered Jesus if He simply would fall down and worship him?" I thought of the Temple complex in Jerusalem where the devil tempted Jesus to make a spectacle of Himself and again was struck by the humility and trust and dependence of Jesus. He truly trusted His Father to provide for all His needs. He truly sought the affirmation of His Father above all earthly praise. He truly believed in His Father's plan for His life.

What about me? Do I trust Jesus in the same way? How do I respond when temptation comes? Am I willing to fast and pray and place myself and my future in my Father's hands? Am I humble enough to admit my brokenness before Him? Trusting enough to let Him guide and direct my steps? Dependent enough to surrender my will and my life and my hopes and my dreams into His hands? All these questions ran through my mind that day. I don't know that I came to any hard and fast answers but I did find comfort in reciting Jesus' words to myself. Claiming His promises and protection for my life. "Do not live by bread alone, Doug, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Do not try to satisfy your every longing but instead let those longings remind you of your even greater longing for God. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test, Doug." Do not presume upon His grace. Do not take His love for granted. "Worship the Lord your God, Doug, and serve Him alone." Make God the supreme treasure of your life and prioritize accordingly. In this way, you will find yourself resisting every temptation the enemy might throw your way.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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October 10, 2022
Signs and Wonders

Readings for today: Matthew 4:23-25, 8:14-17, Mark 1:21-39, Luke 4:31-44

I have felt for a few years now that we are seeing the beginnings of a tsunami of pain that is just starting to hit our shores. More and more families are breaking down. Our children are suffering from increasing rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. Our culture is filled with an increasing amount of rage and anger. Death threats are now common against those with whom we disagree. It seems like everything is taken to the extreme. It makes for a very hostile and dangerous environment. Of course it must be acknowledged that what seems new to many of us has been the normative experience for so many of our friends of color or members of the LGBTQ community. They have lived with these threats for decades or more. But is this all there is? Are we doomed to live our lives in a never ending cycle of self-destruction? Constantly drawing and re-drawing our boundaries ever tighter in order to protect those we love? Isolating ourselves more and more from the complexities of the world in order to stay safe? Or is there a different way? A more excellent way?

First century culture in Palestine was little different than our own. Pharisees. Saducees. Essenes. Herodians. Roman collaborators. It was a divided society where different religious/political factions dotted the landscape. Each vying for power. Each seeking supremacy so they could eradicate their opposition. This was the world into which Jesus was born. It was a world full of violence and pain. A world full of life-threatening poverty and deprivation. A world where death was a daily companion. This was the world in which Jesus launched his ministry. And what a ministry it was! So different than all the rest! Jesus welcomed the outcast. Ate with sinners. Spent time with the ritually unclean. He lifted up women. He cleansed lepers. He restored the isolated and lonely to community. As His fame grew, many people came from all over to bring Him their sick. Their diseased. Their hurting. Their wounded. The demon-possessed were set free. He healed all their afflictions. These were the signs and wonders of a new kind of Kingdom being born. A new kind of King had come into the world. And these were just the “edges of His ways.” (Job 26:14)

Jesus said those who followed Him would do even greater works than He...is that even possible? Can you fathom a world where the church builds on the work Jesus began? What if the church made it her aim to serve her community? Going out each and every week - having been filled and equipped in worship - to share the good news of the gospel? Bring healing in Jesus' name? Freedom in Jesus' name? Hope in Jesus' name? What if the church was known as a refuge? A place of safety and security amidst the turmoil and violence of our world? What if the church was known for love rather than hate? Authenticity and honesty rather than hypocrisy? Would not the fame of Jesus increase? Would not people be drawn to the care and comfort we provide? What if we laid aside our internal theological fights and squabbles and instead linked arms to serve? What if we stopped stabbing our wounded in the back and instead embraced grace as a way of life? What if we put aside our need for political influence and power and instead sought to prayerfully and thoughtfully engage across the political spectrum? And what stops us? Why not start right now? Even today?

Friends, true followers of Jesus should be known more by what they're for than what they're against. Jesus was certainly against many things in his day but he was known for his love and compassion and ministry among the poor. The outcast. The sinner. What is your church known for? And how can you - as a member of that local church - represent Christ more faithfully today?

Readings for tomorrow: John 3-5

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October 11, 2022

Humility

Readings for today: John 3-5

I grew up the “hero” of an alcoholic family system. For those who may be unfamiliar with family systems theory, it’s the idea that everyone within a dysfunctional family plays a particular role. Each individual role is designed consciously or subconsciously to help the individual cope with the shame of the brokenness of the particular system. In my family’s case, it was the shame of alcoholism and since I was the hero, I attempted to draw everyone’s attention away from the source of our shame by over-achieving. I did my best to be perfect. I wanted to prove to everyone how I had escaped the system. Overcome the shame. Achieved success despite my background. The result was deep insecurity covered over by an inflated ego.

Naturally, I brought this with me into my work as a pastor. The “hero” mentality in me feasted on the help I was able to provide, the success I had in leading churches, and the praise I received for my pastoral work. This led me to try even harder and achieve even more and I soon found myself burning out. I went to a counselor. He asked me a question in our first session that hit my like a ton of bricks, “Who are you trying to impress, Doug?” For the first time, I began to question my approach to life. Who was I trying to impress? Why was I trying so hard? Why did I live with such deep insecurity? I wish I could say I found answers to these questions right away but it took me several more years and a truly brutal 19 months in Wisconsin to figure things out. God humbled me in Wisconsin in ways that can’t be expressed in words. He broke me utterly. He crucified my ego. He exposed my empty ambitions and vain conceit. He stripped my life down to the studs. Took away all I held dear. Made me the “villain” in my own story and helped me see my desperate need for grace. It was like a 2nd conversion. It was like I was born again...again.

I think this is why I love John the Baptist so much. He has absolute clarity about the real “Hero” of the story. It’s not him. Despite his popularity and fame, he recognizes he is simply a witness. A man called to prepare the way for someone greater than himself. Yes, he has launched a successful ministry. One that changed the lives of who knows how many people. But he recognizes this is not his own work but the work of the Father. “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.” (John 3:27) So when his disciples come to him to complain about the growing popularity of Jesus, John’s answer is easy. “He must increase and I must decrease.” (John 3:30) John knows he is not the bridegroom. He is like the best man, rejoicing greatly to see the bridegroom and hear His voice. Having seen the fulfillment of God’s promise in Jesus, John’s joy is now complete. His work is done. It is enough. He is content.

One of my favorite quotes comes from the founder of the Moravians. A man by the name of the Count Nicolaus von Zinzendorf. He is reputed to have once said, “Preach the gospel. Die. Be forgotten.” I love it. It expresses with clarity the greatest desire of my heart. No matter how significant my influence, how large my church, how successful my ministry, how faithful I am over years of ministry, when I finally retire or pass on I want no one to remember my name. I want no one to give me any credit for what I have done. I have received nothing except that which God has placed in my hands. I have accomplished nothing except through Christ and by His Spirit. I have done nothing worth mentioning except that which God has taken and multiplied many times over. I am simply a vessel through which He does His work. A servant who serves at His pleasure. A lump of clay He has molded for His purposes. May He increase to such an extent in my life that I am completely obscured by His glory and all the credit goes to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 8:1-4, 9:1-17, 12:1-21, Mark 1:40-45, 2:1-3:21, Luke 5:12-6:19

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October 12, 2022
Mercy over Sacrifice

Readings for today: Matthew 8:1-4, 9:1-17, 12:1-21, Mark 1:40-45, 2:1-3:21, Luke 5:12-6:19

“Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous but sinners.” (Matt. 9:12-13)

This is what I love most about Jesus. He absolutely loves sinners. He loves the lost. He loves the wandering. He loves the confused. He loves the doubter. He loves the questioner. He loves the hurting. He loves the broken. He loves the oppressed. He loves the enslaved. He loves the imprisoned. He loves all those who find themselves struggling with unbelief. He not only loves them but He comes to be with them. He comes to heal them. He comes to rescue them. He comes to deliver them. He comes to set them free. He comes to reclaim them. He comes to redeem them. He will never rest until He chases down every single person who is lost and brings them home again. This is His heart and we see it on full display in today’s reading.

Jesus is the Great Physician. He has come to heal the great sickness infecting all of humanity. He knows sin is more than what we do or say or think. It is a disease that corrupts all it touches. A pervasive power at work inside us, poisoning our very souls. It is a terminal illness we cannot escape. A pandemic for which we have no effective treatment. Thankfully, Jesus sees our helpless condition. Jesus knows the hopeless condition into which we are born. And He alone has the power to heal us. Even more importantly, Jesus wants to heal us. It is the great desire of His heart. It is the fundamental reason behind why He came.

Can you imagine what might happen if the followers of Jesus became known more for mercy rather than right sacrifice? Known more for love of sinners rather than condemnation? Known more for compassion towards those who are lost and wandering, doubting and deconstructing than judgment? This is Jesus’ call to us today. As we go about our daily lives, we meet all kinds of people. Lepers, paralytics, tax collectors, sinners, Sabbath-keepers and Sabbath-breakers, Pharisees, scribes, men and women with withered hands and withered souls. How do we respond to them? Do we treat them with the dignity and love they deserve as human beings made in the image of God? Do we have compassion on their helpless and hopeless estate? Are we willing to extend grace and mercy and embrace them as Jesus did? Pray for God to open your eyes to truly see the spiritual condition of those around you. Pray for God to fill your heart with His love and compassion so you might minister to their deepest needs. Pray for opportunities to introduce them to the Great Physician who longs to heal them and make them whole.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 5-7, Luke 6:20-49, 11:1-13

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October 13, 2022
Building a Strong Foundation

Readings for today: Matthew 5-7, Luke 6:20-49, 11:1-13

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.” (Luke 6:46-49)

The Sermon on the Mount is the greatest sermon ever preached. Period. In it, Jesus casts His vision for His Kingdom. He defines what life looks like under His rule and reign. He sets boundaries around human desire and behavior to protect us from self-destruction and to teach us how to build a life that will last forever. Sadly, too many of us believe we can choose our own path. Defiantly, we try to chart our own course into eternity. Foolishly, we attempt to bushwhack our way through the wilderness of this world only to quickly lose our way. The results are tragic and heartbreaking.

I wonder sometimes why we find our culture’s pact with sin and death so enticing. What is it about our culture that draws us in? We all know it’s not good for us. We all know the pace we set isn’t healthy. We all feel the effects of isolation and loneliness. We all struggle under the pressure that’s created and exasperated through social media. So why do we persist? Why can’t we seem to opt out? Are we truly so addicted we cannot stop?

How many families have to break up? How many pills do we have to take? How many children have to suffer before we wake up from the nightmare we find ourselves in? When will we stop believing the lie that life is all about me? All about my wants? All about my desires? The world tells us to “follow your heart” and “be true to yourself.” I can think of nothing more devastating. The world tells us we “can be whoever we want to be” and to do “whatever feels good.” I can think of nothing more heartbreaking. Do we not see the pain we are leaving in our wake? The broken relationships? And for what? So we can selfishly pursue our own happiness at the expense of others? Do we not see the toll this is taking? The high price we are paying? The cost to those around us, especially those we love most? (If you need examples, do a google search on the New York Times and divorce. They have published several articles over the last couple of years extolling the virtues of divorce as an act of “self-actualization.” Ugh.)

I meet them every single day. In coffee shops and bars all over town. Men and women and children who are suffering. Struggling. Wrestling with a deep sense of existential loneliness because they have tried their best to do life on their own. They “believed in themselves” but that belief took them nowhere. Like Sinatra, they did life “my way” only to find themselves at a dead end. They tried to be the captain of their own destiny. The master of their own fate. The ruler of their own domain only to discover their reach far exceeded their grasp. In the words of Jesus, they built their entire lives on sand and their ruin was great.

Perhaps that describes you today. You are looking around at the ruins of your marriage. The ruins of your family. The ruins of your professional career. Your bank account is overdrawn. Your energy levels are dangerously low. Your emotional reserves are tapped out. Your relationships are broken. Your heart is aching. And you feel so very alone. Depressed. Angry. Frustrated. Anxious. Afraid. Perhaps you’ve even been tempted to put an end to it all. Don’t believe the lie! God is with you! Even in the valley of

the shadow! Even in the darkest of nights! His presence is always there to comfort and to guide and to bring us back into the light!

So how do we get from here to there? We start building on the rock. We start by surrendering our hearts and lives to Jesus. We invite the Holy Spirit to come and take up residence within us so He may transform us from the inside out. Only God can re-orient the desires of our hearts! Only God can re-prioritize the values of our lives! Only God can redirect our loves. As He does this deep work in us, what comes out of us begins to change. Life on the outside begins to reflect the new life that's emerging on the inside. Regenerate actions flow from a regenerated heart. New wine is poured from new wineskins as God removes our hearts of stone and gives us new hearts that beat for Him alone!

How do we know if we've received this new heart? Look at the Sermon on the Mount. Rather than treat it as a list of "do's and don'ts" instead consider it more of a diagnostic. Let the words of Jesus dissect your every thought. Your every deed. Your every emotion. Let it stand like a plumb line in your life against which you are constantly measuring yourself. Not because you must earn God's favor but because you long to bring glory to God. Not because you have to follow some law but because you want to chart the progress the Holy Spirit is making in sanctifying you for His Kingdom. Not because you have to clean yourself up before God can love you or accept you but because you trust He has already done so and is hard at work to present you blameless before His throne.

One can spend a lifetime learning from these few chapters and still never arrive. This isn't about perfection, friends. It's about the journey. It's about following the way of Jesus. And if you are like most, you will find yourself stumbling down the road like a drunk man, swaying from one side to the other. That's okay. That's actually quite normal. The key is to keep walking down the road.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 8:5-13, 11:1-30, Luke 7

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October 14, 2022
Dining with Jesus

Readings for today: Matthew 8:5-13, 11:1-30, Luke 7

Imagine you're having Jesus over for dinner. You send out invitations. Line up a caterer. Clean your house. Put out tables and chairs. Light your scented candles. Maybe even spring for some live music. You leave nothing to chance. You want Him to be impressed. The day of the affair arrives. Your home is packed with people. These are your friends. Your colleagues. Your family. All of whom cannot wait to meet Jesus. He walks in. What do you do? Do you greet Him? Offer to take His coat? Get Him a drink? Give Him the seat of honor? Do you make sure to serve Him first as your guest? Introduce Him to all your friends by name? Make sure He feels welcomed and honored? Of course you would. You would be embarrassed if you didn't. Your friends would be ashamed of you.

Let's take it up a notch. Imagine what would happen if a homeless man wandered in to your home that evening. Or a prostitute. Or a drug addict. Imagine them disrupting things. Imagine the crowd parting as people stumble over themselves so they don't have to touch them. Imagine the room going silent and all eyes turning to you to see how you will respond. Now imagine those same eyes shifting to Jesus as the homeless man/prostitute/drug addict falls at His feet. Weeping. Shedding so many tears, Jesus' feet literally become drenched. Now imagine the homeless man taking out a dirty handkerchief to wipe His shoes. The prostitute letting her hair down to dry his feet. The drug addict using his ratty t-shirt. You would probably be uncomfortable with the whole scene. Unsure of what to do or how to respond. Embarrassed by their behavior. After all, this whole affair is supposed to be about impressing Jesus!

Imagine Jesus turns to you and tells you a story. Two people went into deep debt to a loan shark. One for five hundred thousand and the other for fifty. Neither could afford to pay. In a shocking move, the loan shark forgave both their debts. Which would love him more? The one who owed him the greater amount, of course. This homeless man. This woman of the night. This poor addict struggle with many things. Their lives are a trainwreck. Your life, on the other hand, is good. You live in a nice home. You are surrounded by people who love and respect you. You make a good living. You enjoy some of the finer things of life. Yes, you know you are not perfect. Yes, you have your own struggles. Yes, life is not always easy. But you have been given much whereas this man. This woman. This addict have been given little. And even what little they did have has been squandered away. Who do you think will love Me more?

The one who is forgiven much, loves much. The one who is forgiven little, loves little. Friends, ask the Father to show you the full measure of your sin. Ask Him to show you how far you have fallen short of His glory. Not so that you will despair but so you can more deeply appreciate the sacrifice He made to save you. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it. He sent Jesus so the world might be saved through Him! All of us from the richest to the poorest. From the most privileged to the most oppressed. Perpetrators and victims alike need forgiveness. We all need grace. And Jesus stands ready to offer it to us in abundance. Know your sins have been forgiven and let that fan the flames of your devotion to Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 12:22-50, Mark 3:22-35, Luke 8:19-21, 11:14-54

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October 15, 2022
A House Divided

Readings for today: [Matthew 12:22-50](#), [Mark 3:22-35](#), [Luke 8:19-21, 11:14-54](#)

“Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.” (Matt. 12:25)

Abraham Lincoln quoted this verse in his famous campaign speech delivered in 1858 at the Illinois Republican State Convention. Though largely unknown, he had just won the nomination to run for U.S. Senate against Stephen A. Douglas. Lincoln was referring to the issue of slavery, of course. Douglas wanted to find a middle ground between the North and South but Lincoln knew better. He knew the issue had to be settled once and for all. He knew there could be no compromise. He knew the United States could not continue with half in support of slavery and half in support of freedom. A nation divided cannot stand.

The same was true in Jesus’ day. The house of Israel was divided along all kinds of political lines. Some supported collaboration with Rome. Some refused to entertain any such thing. Some advocated for a violent overthrow. Others eschewed violence altogether. Some believed the answer was Torah faithfulness. Others withdrew into the desert because they believed the religious authorities were corrupt. And then along comes Jesus. A miracle worker. A healer. An exorcist. He performs His signs and wonders publicly and it must have felt to the scribes and Pharisees like He was throwing gasoline on the fire. It’s why they tried so hard to discredit Him. Accusing Him of casting out demons by the power of the devil. But Jesus was ready for them. He knows their kingdom is divided and is about to be laid waste. He knows the glorious city of Jerusalem is a tinderbox waiting to explode. He has no desire to act as an “accelerant” rather He wants them to see and experience the Kingdom of God. He points them to the fruit of His actions. The blind see. The mute speak. The deaf hear. The lame walk. These are not acts of the devil that result in further pain and suffering and division and brokenness. No, the fruit Jesus bears is healing, wholeness, and restoration. All signs of the Holy Spirit at work.

I’ve been thinking about this verse a lot recently. We are raising teenagers in our home so it can often feel like we are living in a “house divided.” Sometimes the conflict is almost too much to bear. It’s in those moments when things seem hardest that God speaks to me. He reminds me His mercies are new every morning. His faithfulness is great. I can cast all my anxieties on Him because He cares for me. His perfect love casts out all my fear. He sets me free to bear the fruit of healing, wholeness, grace, and peace as I raise my children and they are blessed. A family divided cannot stand.

I am also the pastor of a church. It’s not easy leading a church in these tumultuous times. The COVID pandemic exposed all sorts of divisions politically and socially among God’s people. Many of our political leaders stoked the fires of fear and anger and hatred and division and sadly those fires are burning bright in many churches. It’s heartbreaking to receive some of the emails I’ve received from people I’ve known and loved for many years. It’s painful to watch families and communities split apart over issues that have nothing to do with the gospel. Many pastors are leaving the ministry. Many churches are closing their doors. A church divided cannot stand.

How does a follower of Christ respond in this cultural moment? We respond like Jesus. We make it our aim to act as agents of healing in our communities, doing all we can to come alongside those who are hurting. We act as agents of unity in our communities, doing all we can to bring people together. We act as agents of wholeness in our communities, binding up the broken and helping them put the pieces back together. We act as agents of blessing in our community, bearing the fruit of the Spirit which is good and righteous and true.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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October 17, 2022
The Kingdom of God

Readings for today: Matthew 13:1-53, Mark 4:1-34, Luke 8:1-18

Have you ever wondered what the Kingdom of God is actually like? And how it differs from the kingdoms of this world? In our readings for today, Jesus takes up the subject of the Kingdom of God and describes it from a number of different angles.

The Kingdom is like a field full of different kinds of soils, some more fruitful than others.

The Kingdom is like a paddock where both wheat and weeds grow up together.

The Kingdom is like the smallest of seeds that blossoms into one of the largest of trees.

The Kingdom is like the little bit of leaven one puts in bread to leaven the whole lump

The Kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field.

The Kingdom is like that one pearl of great price.

The Kingdom is like a net that captures all kinds of fish, some good and some bad.

It is striking how different Jesus' kingdom is from the kingdoms of this world. The world's kingdoms value wealth and power and success. They measure themselves according to their size and influence. Their goal is to achieve as much as possible. To sit atop the rankings. They jockey for position. They compete with one another. They take delight on another's fall even as they scramble for a higher rung on the proverbial ladder.

Sadly, too many churches fall into this trap as well. We value attendance. The size of our annual budgets. The number of people on staff. The beauty and attractiveness of our property and facilities. We jockey for position on Outreach Magazine's Top 100. We seek to expand our brand by planting churches in communities where many other gospel-preaching churches may already exist. We define success by the number of new attendees even though statistics show they are often transfers from the churches around us. So our "success" is really another church's "failure." The American church is particularly susceptible to this line of thinking. I heard a pastor recently argue that we should pull back from missions around the world so we could focus on planting churches in America. After all, he said, imagine what God could do with all the resources we have in this country? As if God needs our resources to accomplish His mission.

I will confess my own failings here as well. It is so tempting for me to focus on the crowd that gathers on a Sunday morning. To dwell on how they receive the message I preach and whether or not they are putting it into practice. I spend a lot of energy daydreaming over what God could do with the resources of my church family and how that would impact not only Parker but the whole world. If I am not careful, my passion to reach the lost with the gospel and see God awaken every heart in my congregation could spill over into a sinful trust in our strength. Our wealth. Our resources. It is good to be reminded that the Kingdom cannot be measured by the number of people who attend. The number of dollars given. The ability to expand programming and update facilities. The Kingdom is measured in much smaller, more subtle ways. It is the man set free from addiction. The abused woman who finds a

listening ear. It is a marriage saved by counseling. A child who invites Jesus into their heart. It is a person going on a mission trip for the very first time or volunteering to serve in a classroom even though they feel so inadequate to the task. It is men and women stepping forth to lead and serve in all sorts of ways. This is what the Kingdom is like. It is often hidden. Often under the radar. Often under the surface. It is messy and complex. Never clean or neat or easy. It is often two steps forward, one step back. The people we think have so much potential often are the most resistant and the people we often overlook become the true heroes and heroines of the faith.

In my experience, good soil is always mixed in with concrete, gravel, thorns and thistles. Wheat is always mixed in with weeds. Mustard seeds often get lost in the shuffle. Leaven disappears into the dough. The treasure sometimes stays hidden for years. Finding that one pearl can take decades. Casting a wide net brings in all kinds of fish. Such is life in the Kingdom and thank God it's not up to me to sort it all out.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 8:18-34, 9:18-38, Mark 4:35-41, 5:1-43, Luke 8:22-56, 9:57-62

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October 18, 2022

Riding Out the Storm

Readings for today: Matthew 8:18-34, 9:18-38, Mark 4:35-41, 5:1-43, Luke 8:22-56, 9:57-62

Every year around Christmas or my birthday, my wife and I talk about how notoriously difficult it is to buy a gift for me. I have a few hobbies like hiking or reading or working out but those don't come with a lot of needs. I'm not big into clothes. I don't have a lot of toys. I live a pretty simple life at the end of the day. However, last year something changed. I found an organization that employs artists to reproduce famous artwork in the same medium. I told my wife about it and she asked if I would ever want something from them. I asked for an oil on canvas reproduction of The Storm on the Sea of Galilee painted by Rembrandt in 1633. She agreed. She got our whole family to pitch in. It took fourteen weeks to arrive and it now hangs in my office next to the rocking chair where I spend time with God almost every morning.

I love looking at that painting as I meditate and pray. I often find myself identifying with one or more of the disciples in the boat. Sometimes I'm near the front trying with all my might to keep the sails up in the midst of the storm. Sometimes I'm in the back holding onto the rudder. Sometimes I'm the guy puking over the side. ;-) Through it all, Jesus just sits there calmly letting me know He is with me. I am in no danger because He is in control. The wind and the waves pose no threat to Him or to those who call on His name.

Take a look at the painting below. Let yourself marvel with the disciples at the One who controls every storm. Let yourself rest in His presence. Let His peace flow over you. No matter what you may be going through in your life right now, He is with you. You are in no danger. He can heal every disease. He can cast out every demon. He can even raise the dead! Nothing in this world can snatch you out of His hand!

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 10, 14, Mark 6:7-56, Luke 9:1-17, John 6

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The Storm on the Sea of Galilee painted by Rembrandt in 1633.

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October 19, 2022

Sent Ones

Readings for today: Matthew 10, 14, Mark 6:7-56, Luke 9:1-17, John 6

I leave Sunday for Africa. I will fly out of Denver around 9PM and arrive in Dessie, Ethiopia on Tuesday at 4:15PM. Tee to green, it's a journey of about 36 hours. Dessie is located in the Amhara region of Ethiopia in the northern part of the country where a conflict has been raging off and on for a couple of years. Dessie itself was occupied for a period of time before the government recaptured it last year. We are heading there to train church planters. Last spring, we launched fifty new church planters into the area and we are planning on launching seventy-five more next week. We will spend our time praying for them. Worshipping with them. Training them. Interviewing them. Partnering with their local, indigenous denominations to make sure they have the resources they need. It's a hard work. They will be ministering in an area where there is not only political conflict but religious conflict as well. They will face persecution. They will face opposition. They will face hostility. But they are not alone. Jesus is with them. The Holy Spirit empowers them. They've been given authority to heal the sick, cleanse lepers, cast out demons, and raise the dead. It's why I love being around them so much. They remind me of the first apostles.

Apostle is a word that simply means "sent one." It's less a title and more a description of a role. Apostles are emissaries. Their purpose is to convey a message. It was commonly translated "messenger" in ancient times. One can easily see why Jesus picked up this term. He was sending His disciples out on a mission. Their job was to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God in word and deed. They were to speak God's Word and then demonstrate the authority of God's Word through the performance of miraculous signs and wonders. It was a powerful combination. One that put them at odds with the local political and religious authorities. As a result, they would face hostility and opposition and persecution and yet many would believe their message and receive saving faith.

Every single Christian is called to be an apostle. Every single Christian is sent out by Jesus to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God. Every single Christian is called to risk everything for this endeavor. Our lives. Our livelihoods. All our worldly wealth and possessions. We are to hold nothing back in our attempt to reach the world with the gospel. This is what set those first disciples apart. It's what set the early church apart. It's what still sets apart Christians in places like Ethiopia, Djibouti, or South Sudan. They are changing entire villages and regions as they faithfully and sacrificially give their lives to answer the call. Are we not called to do the same? In whatever village, town, city, or region where we've been planted?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 15, Mark 7, 8:1-10

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October 20, 2022
Honor/Shame Culture

Readings for today: Matthew 15, Mark 7, 8:1-10

“And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.” (Matthew 15:21-28)

This is perhaps the most confusing story in the gospels. Read through 21st century western eyes, it appears like Jesus is reflecting the sinful, racist attitudes of his day. Jews and Gentiles simply did not interact in the 1st century. Especially a rabbi and a woman. Jesus was fully within his cultural rights to ignore this woman. Reject this woman. Diminish this woman. Some modern commentators point to this story as an example of Jesus’ humanity. They talk about how even Jesus needed correction from time to time. They claim even Jesus needed to progress in his understanding of divine love and the gospel. Nothing could be farther from the truth. True, authentic, honest Biblical exegesis must always begin by approaching the text from within it’s own cultural milieu. We must do our best to remove our own cultural blinders and instead do the hard work of reading the passage against its own cultural backdrop. When one does this, the true meaning of the story comes into view...

The first thing to note is the place. Jesus has intentionally traveled to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This area was a major economic hub and trade center in that part of the world. As such, it was deeply Hellenized. Jews were the marginalized group. They were the ones being exploited for material gain. So why would Jesus go there? Earlier in his ministry Jesus likens His ministry to that of Elijah who once miraculously fed a widow in Sidon when she was starving. The point, of course, is that Jesus’ ministry will transcend race and culture though He will preach first to His own people.

The second thing to note is the time. Like much of the Middle East today, 1st century Palestine was an “honor/shame” culture. As such, there were strict rules governing the behavior of men and women. When those rules were followed, honor accrued. When those rules were ignored, shame accrued. Men gained honor through acts of courage and generosity in the community while women gained honor through their modesty and privacy in the home and family. It would be crazy for an honorable woman to approach a strange man in public across not only gender but ethnic lines just as it would be crazy for an honorable man - a rabbi no less! - to respond to such a woman. However, in this instance, all bets are off due to the desperation this woman feels as she seeks to save her child.

The third thing to note is how the woman addresses Jesus. She addresses Him by his messianic title. She clearly sees Him as more than an itinerant Jewish preacher. She clearly recognizes He’s no ordinary rabbi. There’s something different about this man that makes her abandon all honor in order to fall at his feet with the beggars standard cry, “Have mercy on me.” She would have not have interpreted His silence as an insult. In fact, she would have expected it and sought to overcome it.

Finally, there is the actual exchange itself. When Jesus answers with, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”, He is inviting an interaction with the woman. In essence, He’s saying, “tell me why I should help you?” The woman responds by drawing closer. Her cries of desperation turn to the simple plea of “Lord, help me.” And now the so-called “game” is on. In honor/shame cultures there are rules for this kind of dialogue. A challenge is offered. A response is given. Honor is accrued based on who gets the “best” of the interaction. Jesus has challenged this woman. She has responded. So Jesus offers another challenge. “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Dogs in Jewish culture were almost as bad as pigs. They were mangy, half-wild animals who roamed the streets. Jews regularly used this term as an insult to Gentiles but here Jesus softens it a bit. The term He uses is in the diminutive form - i.e. “little dogs” or puppies - which again suggests He’s fully aware of the game that is taking place. The woman doesn’t even miss a beat. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” One can almost see the twinkle in Jesus’ eyes and his smile of appreciation for how she’s “bested” Him and He freely gives her the honor she has “won.”

Now here’s the really crazy thing about Jesus. It’s what I love most about Him. In “honor/shame” contests, a person typically gains honor at another’s expense. It’s why such contests were so important in 1st century society. It’s how one climbed the socio-economic ladder and became known in their community. Jesus is different. He isn’t interested in how much “honor” accumulates. Instead, He freely gives honor away at His own expense. What about us? We who have been saved by Christ have been given all the “honor” a person could ever receive! We’ve literally been invited into God’s family and adopted as His sons and daughters. What more could we want? Having been given much, should we not seek to give it away? Should we not seek to share the honor we’ve received from God with those around us? Should we not opt out of the power games our culture still plays and instead take the place of the servant?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 16, Mark 8:11-38, 9:1, Luke 9:18-27

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October 21, 2022
The Cross-Shaped Life

Readings for today: Matthew 16, Mark 8:11-38, 9:1, Luke 9:18-27

Following Jesus requires sacrifice. It requires self-denial. It requires picking up a cross. Jesus pulls no punches in our reading today. When Peter takes up the tempter's role and tries to convince Jesus to forgo the way of suffering laid out for Him, Jesus rightly perceives the presence of Satan behind Peter's words. He rebukes Peter harshly just as He once rebuked Satan in the desert, just as He will rebuke him again in the Garden of Gethsemane. Satan is ever-present in Jesus' life. Always seeking to turn Him aside from His Father's plan. Satan knows who he's dealing with. He's under no illusion as to Jesus' identity. He may not understand the full implications of the cross. He may not be able to see the resurrection. But he knows Jesus is the Son of God. He knows Jesus holds the power and authority of God. He knows Jesus is on a mission from God. And he does all he can to derail Him along the way.

Satan is ever-present in our lives as well. Always seeking to turn us aside from the Father's plan for our lives. It's why he tempts us constantly to choose a path without suffering. A path without pain. A path without sacrifice. Satan knows what happens when Christians take up a cross. His power is made perfect in their weakness. His Kingdom comes through their surrender. His will is done as they willingly relinquish all they are and all they have to Him. This is what Satan fears most. True believers who pursue a lifestyle of self-denial in the name of Jesus. True believers who willingly lay down their lives for the sake of the gospel. True believers who find their greatest joy in giving it all for the sake of the Kingdom.

We cannot avoid the cross-shaped life. Not if we want to follow Jesus. On the contrary, Christians understand our lives are not our own. Our possessions are not our own. Our money is not our own. Our time is not our own. Our talent and ability is not our own. Our gifts are not our own. All our achievement and success is not our own. All of these things have been given to us by God so that we might share them with those around us. All of these things have been entrusted to us by God so that we might steward them for His Kingdom purposes. And all of us will one day have to stand before the Lord and give an account of what we did with all He has given us.

Take some time today and reflect on all God has given you. Open up your schedule and prayerfully ask God how He wants you to spend your time. Are you spending daily time with Him. Are you engaging in weekly, in person worship with other believers? Are you regularly finding ways to serve your church family and community? Review your bank statement and latest update to your investment portfolio and ask God how He wants you to spend your money. Are you giving Him the firstfruits of your hard work? Are you giving at least ten percent of your income to the Lord? Are you seeking to be more generous and more sacrificial with each passing year? Sit back and ponder the gifts and talents and abilities God has given you. How are you using these gifts for God's Kingdom purposes? How are you offering these gifts in service to God? As you spend time in prayer, make sure to take every thought captive Christ through His Word. Satan will do all he can to derail this process. He will do all he can to disrupt and distract you along the way. He wants you as far away from the cross as possible. Rebuke him and instead cling to Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 17-18, Mark 9:2-50, Luke 9:28-56

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October 22, 2022
True Greatness

Readings for today: Matthew 17-18, Mark 9:2-50, Luke 9:28-56

We all want to be great. We all want to be known. We all want to be significant. In large or small ways, we all desire success. Achievement. Recognition. We want to be the best. Finish first. Get to the top of whatever mountain we're trying to climb. We want respect. We want the people around us to think highly of us. We want to be able to look in the mirror and be proud of what we see.

The same was true for the disciples. They signed on - or so they thought - to this new kingdom movement. They believed Jesus was the Messiah. They believed He was the Christ. And for them - Jews living in the 2nd Temple period of Israel's history - this could only mean one thing...Jesus would lead a revolution. He would cleanse the Temple. Toss out the religious elites. Overthrow the Romans. Re-establish the throne of David. Win Israel's independence from foreign powers. This is what had happened throughout their history and they wanted in on the ground floor when it happened again.

So they asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" It's a loaded question. Freighted with all kinds of cultural and relational baggage. On a personal level, they are asking for themselves. Which of us is the greatest? Which of us will get to sit at your right hand? On a cultural level, they are asking for discernment to find out who's in and who's out. Who among the crowds that are following them are worthy to be part of this new kingdom? And who do we need to keep out? On a political level, they want to know who will hold the power and positions of influence in this new kingdom? What cabinet positions will we occupy once you've established your rule and reign? They want to know so they can prepare. They want to know so they can start jockeying for position. They're probably looking around at each other, measuring the competition.

Jesus' response had to be mystifying. The humblest are the greatest? The last are the first? The least have the most? We have to become like children to enter the kingdom? Remember, in that culture, children were non-persons. More like property. They had no rights. No freedoms. At the same time, children were deeply loved. Showered with affection. They were considered God's greatest blessing for a family. So what is it about children that makes them so great in Jesus' eyes?

First and foremost, trust. Children, especially when very young, find it easy to trust. They accept what their parents say without question. If you tell them the sun will rise at midnight, they will wake up fully expecting it to happen. They believe easily. They are not skeptical. At least not until they get older. They've not had all the life experiences that can make us cynical and bitter. They see the world through rose-colored glasses. They believe the best about those around them. And this is what Jesus wants from His disciples as well.

Second, humility. Little children do not harbor ambition. They do not need to be rich and famous. They do not grasp for power or influence or authority. They are not wrapped up in achievement or success. They are not self-conscious or even self-aware. Self has no place in their thinking at all! I believe it was CS Lewis who once said "true humility is not thinking more highly of yourself than you ought. Nor is it thinking less of yourself than you ought. It is simply thinking of your "self" less." This comes naturally to a child and Jesus wants it to come naturally to His disciples.

Third, wonder. Children live with a sense of wonder and awe at the world around them. They love to explore. They love to adventure. They are naturally curious. Naturally inquisitive. They want to know

why things work they way they do or why things are the way they are. I remember when my four children went through their “why” phase. Every question. Every day. For weeks on end. Why this? Why that? Why? Why? Why? Sure, it got annoying but when I stepped back, I could see the wonder underlying it all. They simply wanted to know more about this grand world in which we live.

There are probably many more lessons we can draw from our passage this morning but I have to believe Jesus - coming off His transfiguration moment - wanted to cement in His disciple’s hearts the truth of His Kingdom. It would not be like the kingdoms of this world. It would not be run like the kingdoms of this world. It would not hold to the same values of the kingdoms of this world. It would be radically different. Wholly other. And their entrance into such a kingdom would come only as they left their old lives behind and embraced the new life Jesus offers in Himself.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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October 24, 2022
No Condemnation

Readings for today: John 7-9

We've all probably heard the phrase, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." I don't know about you but I have not found it all that helpful. First of all, those who do not believe are not convinced they are "sinners" and tend to resent the moniker. Second, it's really hard to do. Separating one's behavior from one's identity is growing more and more difficult in our world. In fact, there are many who would argue it is impossible. And yet Jesus seemed to do it all the time.

The beginning of John 8 is a famous story. Maybe one of the most famous in all of Scripture. And though it's origin is questionable - it doesn't appear in the earliest and best manuscripts - it just sounds like Jesus so we tend to keep it in. A woman caught in the very act of adultery is brought before Jesus. The Pharisees and teachers of the law are almost gleeful in their condemnation. They can't wait to pick up the first stone. They throw her down before Him, pretty convinced He will have mercy which in turn will allow them to accuse Him of breaking the Law. Of course, anyone familiar with the Law can already see the problem. If they caught this woman in the act, where is the man? According to Leviticus 20:10 both parties deserve the death penalty. Perhaps that's what Jesus is writing in the dust? Maybe He knows the man's name? If they caught her in the act, why have they not carried out her punishment? The Law is clear. What's stopping them? Perhaps it's because they don't really care about her crime but are far more concerned with trapping Jesus?

In response, Jesus does this extraordinary thing. He puts the onus back on them. "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." He hasn't condemned her nor has He affirmed her. He hasn't condemned the Pharisees nor has He affirmed them. Instead, Jesus brilliantly lobs the ball back in their court and forces them to make their own decision. The Pharisees put down their stones and slowly walk away. The woman is left all alone, prompting this famous exchange. "Woman, has no one condemned you?" "No one, Lord." "Nor do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

I simply love this about Jesus. He accepts people for who they are but loves them too much to leave them there. He meets us right where we are, takes us by the hand, and leads us to a better place. He accepts us, warts and all, without affirming our sin. To the Pharisee, he says, "Are you really without sin?" To those caught in sin, he says, "I do not condemn you." And to both, he says, "Go and sin no more."

As Christians, there is a lot in this world we simply cannot affirm. Changing attitudes in gender and sexuality. Abortion on demand. Racism and sexual abuse. Deceit and falsehood. Anger and hate. These things are not of God and yet so many embrace them. Defend them. Use them as means to a greater end. The answer cannot be rejection. Jesus simply will not allow us to walk away from anyone, including our enemies. So we must find a way - as Jesus found a way - to accept people for who they are without affirming their beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors. Thankfully, this is the heart of the gospel. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While we were enemies of God, Christ made peace with us. While we were pushing Him away, Christ embraced us. May the Spirit give us the courage to do the same!

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 10, John 10:1-11:54

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October 25, 2022
Cutting Through the Noise

Readings for today: Luke 10, John 10:1-1:54

Noise. There's a lot of it in our lives. From the moment our alarm clocks go off until we finally put down the phone or turn off the television at the end of the night, our lives are full of noise. So many voices. Telling us all kinds of things. Much of it not good for us. The bully at school who tells us we're worthless. The co-worker who's so negative all the time. The spouse who badgers or berates us. The child who screams when they don't get their way. The commercials that tempt us to think life is all about us. The subliminal messages coming through on social media that constantly invite comparison. The news outlets spinning world events to bolster a particular worldview. The proliferation of fake news, gossip, and a rumor mill run wild. And, in the middle of it all, the still small voice of God whispering continually to our hearts.

Can you hear Him? Can you hear His voice? Amidst all the noise and distractions? When was the last time you sat in silence? I mean true silence. No one around. No devices present to distract. No radio. No television. Just you and God sitting in silence together. "My sheep hear my voice..." Perhaps one of the main reasons we struggle so much with our faith is we do not take the time to listen for God's voice. We expect Him to compete with all the other voices in our lives. Shout them down. Yell over the top of them. We expect Him to make Himself known to us but we refuse to create space in our lives for that to happen. Instead, we expect Him to push His way in. Elbow His way to the front of the line. Then and only then will we turn and acknowledge Him.

Jesus doesn't work that way. There's a great story from the Old Testament about a man named Elijah. He went out to meet with God. A great storm whipped up. God wasn't in the storm. A great fire raged. God wasn't in the fire. A great earthquake shook the very ground. God wasn't in the earthquake. Then a still small voice. Elijah covered his head. He knew he was hearing the voice of God. "My sheep hear my voice..." Do you want to hear the voice of God? Make time for solitude and silence in your life.

For me, this often comes at the end of the day. My children are in bed. My wife as well. I sit in my favorite chair in the living room. Nothing is on. I read God's Word. I meditate. I pray. I think back over the events of my day. The people I met. The conversations I had. The work I was able to accomplish. I pay close attention to how I experienced each moment. And I lay those feelings before the Lord. I ponder what's to come the following day. What am I excited about? Nervous about? Who will I be meeting with and how can I serve them? What challenges will I be facing and how do they make me feel? All of these things I simply lay before Lord and ask Him to speak into them. Sometimes He does. Sometimes He simply reaches out and takes my hand, letting me know He'll be with me no matter what.

My sheep hear my voice. I know them. They follow me. There's nothing more comforting than walking through life with the Good Shepherd at your side.

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 12:1-13:30

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October 26, 2022
Honor God

Readings for today: Luke 12:1-13:30

One of the real benefits of coming to Africa is I learn to think in different ways. Ethiopia is an honor-shame culture like much of the rest of the world. What this means is they tend to think collectively instead of individually. Morality is determined relationally rather than internally. The focus is not so much on how to get something right as it is to honor the person and/or community in the process.

The Bible is written in an honor-shame cultural context. It cannot be fully understood apart from this. The stories Jesus tells are less “morality tales” and more about how to honor God and one another through the gospel. The story of the rich fool is a prime example of what I’m talking about. The traditional interpretation is that the man placed his trust in his riches. His sin was to build bigger barns. He was greedy and therefore fell under God’s judgment. But a close reading from the honor-shame perspective reveals even deeper truths.

What was the man’s primary sin? What was it that would have been obvious to everyone listening to Jesus that day? It was when he said, “I know what I will do...” His refusal to honor the community was his major mistake. Whenever a person had a bumper crop in the 1st century, he would make his way down to the village gate to seek advice from the elders. He would tell of the abundant blessings God had poured out on him and he would ask them what he should do. They would deliberate and discuss but eventually would suggest things like making an extravagant offering to the Lord, throwing a party so the whole village could celebrate, and giving to the poor. The man would then go out and do all these things in an effort to bring honor to his community. If, after giving to God and giving to the poor and throwing a party, he still had too much for his current barns to hold then perhaps it would be time to throw up new barns. Perhaps the whole community would come out to help. And everyone would experience the blessing.

As American Christians, we tend to think far too individualistically and we tend to read the Bible far too individualistically. We turn everything into a personal morality tale and while that isn’t all bad, it certainly doesn’t get to the heart of the gospel. When Adam and Eve first sinned in the Garden of Eden, they realized they were naked and immediately felt ashamed. The heart of the story from Genesis 3 onward is of a God who is on a mission to remove our shame. Remove our guilt. Remove our sin. He seeks to cover our shame with His own honor and that’s why Jesus tells the stories He does. This is the central message at the heart of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. It’s the primary driver behind this parable of the rich fool and so many others like it. Jesus takes all His divine honor and glory and gives it away to tax collectors and prostitutes and other sinners.

How then do we respond? We respond the way a tax collector named Zaccheus did. He gave away half of his possessions and made restitution to those he had defrauded. We respond the way a prostitute did, breaking a jar of costly ointment – her most prized possession – over Jesus’ head in an extravagant act of devotion. We respond the way the first disciples did, leaving everything behind in order to follow Jesus. This is how who have been honored by God seek to honor Him in return.

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 14-15

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October 27, 2022
The Mission of Jesus

Readings for today: Luke 14-15

Jesus came to save the least and the lost. He loves them so much He gave His life for them. He will do anything and everything to draw them to Himself. It's why he heals on the Sabbath. It's why He talks of feasts where the poor, the blind, the crippled and the lame become guests of honor. He's the king who is rejected by his friends and sends his servants out to the highways and byways to bring in those who are the least worthy of his attention. It's why He tells stories about a lost sheep that is found. A lost coin that is rediscovered. And two lost sons who are restored. These are the ways of the Kingdom of God and followers of Jesus will seek to walk in these ways themselves.

Do you love the least and the lost? Or do you instead seek a place of honor and glory for yourself? Are you like the man who went to the banquet and took the seat of highest honor for himself? Are you like the invited guests who made all kinds of excuses as to why they couldn't come or had to delay their attendance at the great wedding feast? Are there things in your life that you love more than Jesus? Listen to His words again...

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate...even his own life cannot be my disciple."

"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."

"So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

These are hard sayings to be sure. They do not make any sense from a human perspective. We cannot imagine why the call to follow Jesus would be so costly. And yet, Jesus clearly leaves us no wiggle room. Why? Is it because Jesus is cruel? Is it because Jesus is capricious? Uncaring? Is it because Jesus is a tyrant? The answer is a clear "NO" to all of these things. It is because Jesus is 110% committed to His mission to reach the least and the lost of our world. Those who live at the bottom of society. Those who struggle and suffer and for whom life is full of pain and heartbreak. God loves them with an everlasting love and His great desire is to lift them up. Bless them. Heal them and make them whole.

Jesus has one plan to accomplish this great end. His church. His people. Those who are called by His name and set apart for His purposes. Why must we relinquish all in order to follow Jesus? It is so He can use us as He sees fit. Send us where He needs us. Take our resources and deploy them for His purposes in the world. Our response must be open hands and open hearts. A humble willingness to let God use us as He sees fit. Only then will we find true fulfillment and true joy. Only then will we experience the peace that passes all understanding. Only then will we know the unconditional love and grace of God in our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 19, Mark 10:1-31, Luke 16:1-18:30

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October 28, 2022
All the Wrong Questions

Readings for today: Matthew 19, Mark 10:1-31, Luke 16:1-18:30

I've often marveled at the patience of Jesus. Our questions must seem so silly to Him at times. Our concerns so insignificant in the grand scheme of things. He must shake His head at the way we respond to conflict, interruptions, or those in need. He must grieve at the multitude of ways we try to find loopholes in His Law. His heart must ache when all we seem to want is the absolute minimum when it comes to salvation. Especially when He has so much more in store for us! We are so like the Pharisees and the first disciples. We are no different than those who followed Jesus in those early days. We are selfish and self-absorbed. We are far more caught up in "getting" something from God rather than "giving" our lives to Him. At a fundamental level, we believe we are good people. We believe we deserve God's attention. We believe we have done enough to earn God's favor and love. How much better if we were simply like the tax collector. Slumped in the shadows. Faces in our hands. Never daring to gaze heavenward. Praying a very simple, very ancient prayer, God be merciful to me, a sinner. (Luke 18:13)

In our readings for today, we see all sorts of different people approaching Jesus asking all the wrong questions. The Pharisees want to know under conditions a man can divorce his wife. The better question would be how can a man reconcile with his wife when their relationship seems irretrievably broken? The disciples try to shoo away children who are coming to Jesus for a blessing. A better response would be to pause in their journey and lovingly welcome each and every one of them into His presence. A rich young man asks what he must do to gain eternal life. He seeks to accumulate eternal riches like he has his earthly ones. Jesus sees right through him and challenges him to exchange his "transactional" life for a life of utter dependence on God. Over and over again, their questions betray how little they understand God's Kingdom and the same is true for us as well.

Jesus challenges us to shift our perspective. To lift our eyes above the horizons of this world, above the horizons of this life, above what we think is reasonable or rational to the impossible possibilities God offers to those who authentically and honestly seek His Kingdom. His Kingdom is not of this world. His Kingdom doesn't run on earthly power. His Kingdom has no need of earthly resources. The values of His Kingdom often seem incomprehensible to us and yet when we begin to align our lives along them, we find incredible freedom, irrepressible joy, and a peace that passes all understanding. Can you imagine how your life would be different if you asked Jesus for the strength to reconcile rather than a way out of a conflicted relationship? Imagine if you welcomed interruptions from little children or those of little earthly significance in your life? Imagine trusting God so fully and completely that earthly possessions had no hold on you? How do we get from here to there? We simply pray the prayer of the lowly tax collector. God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Pray those words over and over again until you believe them about yourself. Only then will you find yourself living in the boundless horizons of God's Kingdom.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 20, Mark 10:32-52, Luke 18:31-19:27

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October 29, 2022

The Tragedy of Transactional Thinking

Readings for today: Matthew 20, Mark 10:32-52, Luke 18:31-19:27

Today's devotional builds off of what I wrote yesterday as Jesus continues to expose the hardness of our hearts. He tells a story about day laborers who are hired to work in a vineyard. They are hired in waves. Some at first light. Others mid-morning. Some come at lunchtime. Others mid-afternoon. Finally, there are those who arrive an hour before closing time. Each and every one receives the same wage. If you are like me, you probably feel the Master is being a bit unfair. Maybe even exploitative, especially for those who've been working all day. This isn't equal pay for equal work and those who put in more hours deserve higher pay. It just goes to show how little we understand the ethics of God's Kingdom.

Our problem is that we tend to think "transactionally." This is a natural consequence of growing up in a capitalist system. We work hard so we can earn a paycheck. We use our paycheck to pay the bills that fund our lifestyle. If I want more, I work harder. If I want to enjoy the finer things of life, I get more education, work my way up the corporate ladder, always be on the lookout for the better deal. Sadly, we approach relationships the same way. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. You do for me and I will do for you. I'll hold up my end of the deal as long as you hold up your end. As soon as one party reneges on the agreement or doesn't fulfill their obligations, we are free to terminate the arrangement and move on. This happens in marriage. Family. Friendships. Business partnerships. Church. Even our relationship with God.

Jesus wants us to grasp the wideness of God's mercy. The abundance of God's generosity. The radical nature of God's unconditional love. Our relationship with God is not based on works but purely on His grace. Whether we come to faith as a young child or on our deathbed, God gives us the same gift of eternal life. Whether we live a life of full devotion to God or we struggle to remain faithful along the way, God mercifully and graciously prepares a place for us. This is why Jesus is so appealing to tax collectors and sinners, prostitutes and beggars, the lame and the lepers. They all know they have nothing to offer God and have no expectation of being invited to be part of God's Kingdom. It's much different for those of us who are successful and wealthy, healthy and strong, popular and famous. We believe we've done well and have rightfully earned our spot in God's Kingdom.

Again, I want to challenge you pray this simple prayer. Pray it as often as possible until it you believe it. God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Every single human being – no matter their position or the number of their possessions – is a sinner. Utterly guilty of breaking God's perfect Law. We rightfully deserve God's judgment and our only hope is a divine pardon. Thankfully, God promises to show mercy to all who humble themselves before Him. I encourage you to cry out like the blind beggars of Jericho today and receive the mercy of Jesus as He heals your heart and makes you whole.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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October 31, 2022
Rightful Ownership

Readings for today: Matthew 21:1-22, 26:6-13, Mark 11:1-26, 14:3-9, Luke 19:28-48, John 2:13-25, 11:55-57, 12:1-36

I raised my kids to be independent thinkers. Strong-willed young men and women who can make their way in the world. I love how each of them is finding their way in the world and it is a privilege to walk the journey with them. One of the many lessons I've tried to teach them is the difference between stewardship and ownership. When we grow up, we don't own much. Everything from food to clothing to a roof over our heads is provided. Our job is to be good stewards. Clean our rooms. Follow the house rules. Take care of what we've been given. When we get older. Graduate from high school. Become legally responsible. We start to become owners. We get a job. We pay the bills. We buy things like our own cars or cell phones. As a parent, I no longer have much authority over how my child takes care of their home or how much money they spend on gas or the number of apps they download on their phone.

All four Gospels tell the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple. John's Gospel, however, contains a very important nugget of information. When Jesus drives out the money-changers and turns over the tables of the loan sharks, the Jews ask Him an important question. What sign do you show us that justifies your actions? In other words, by whose authority do you do these things? Who gave you the right to disrupt the Passover? Who told you to bring in the blind and the lame and begin healing? Will you not put a stop to the praises of the children? Jesus' reply could not be more clear, My house shall be called a house of prayer but you make it a den of robbers. Jesus is claiming His rightful ownership of the Temple. He is making it clear to the religious leaders that their stewardship of the sacred places has come to an end. The rightful owner is now on the scene and He will do with His House as He wills. And what is His will? His House will be a place of prayer. A Hospital for healing. A sanctuary for praise.

Imagine how you would feel if someone lived in your home and trashed the place. I have a good friend who owns a rental house in the Denver area. Several years ago, a tenant used his house to grow weed and cook meth. After going to court to get his tenant evicted, my friend had to gut the house and start over. It cost him thousands of dollars not to mention the time and effort he had to put in to get his house back in working order so it could be rented again. Now put yourself in Jesus' sandals. The people you've entrusted your Home to have trashed the place. They have turned it into a den of robbers. Exploiting the pilgrims who come for Passover each year. They make hefty profits by price gouging the people, especially the poor. So He makes a whip of cords and drives them out. He turns over the tables and throws them out. Do you understand now why Jesus is so upset? Zeal for His own Home has consumed Him and He will do whatever it takes to restore His House to its former glory.

Now let me give you an even more radical take. Jesus doesn't just assert His authority over His House, He asserts it over all of creation with the fig tree. Not only that but He tells His disciples that if they have faith and embrace the Kingdom life, they will be able to operate with His authority in the world. They will be able to do to the fig tree what Jesus did or throw mountains into the heart of the sea. Most importantly, whatever they ask for in prayer will be given to them. Why? They are no longer tenants in God's Kingdom but sons and daughters! In a sense, we've been given an "ownership" stake in all of creation and God expects us to exercise dominion and authority and responsibility in His name and for His glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 21:23-22:14, Mark 11:27-12:12, Luke 20:1-18, John 12:37-50

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